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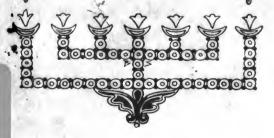


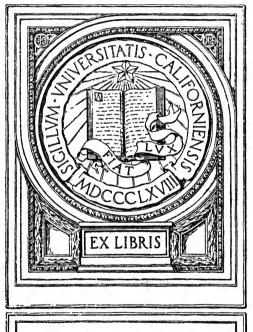
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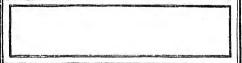


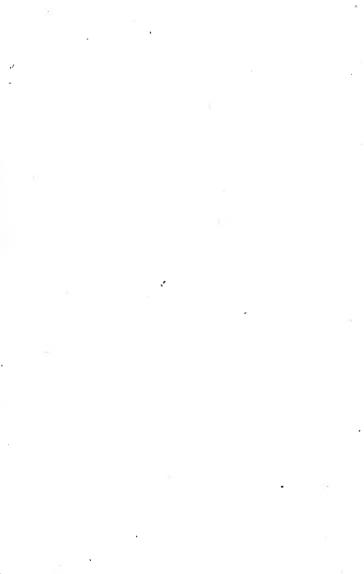
SELMA LAGERLÖF











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THE LEGEND OF THE SACRED IMAGE

BY SELMA LAGERLÖF

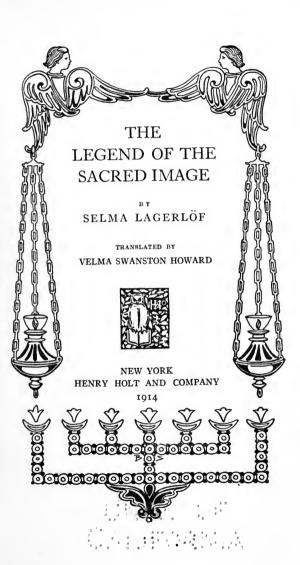
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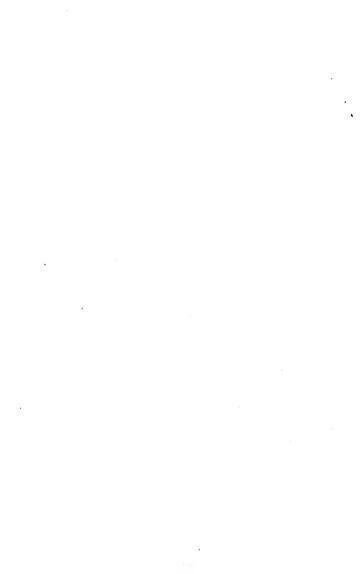


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THE LEGEND OF THE SACRED IMAGE



THE LEGEND OF THE SACRED IMAGE

N old peasant woman walked along the main street of the city of Palermo, leading a donkey that was laden with two baskets filled with garden truck. Behind them strode her husband, who occasionally prodded the animal with his staff.

At a corner they came upon a jeering throng of people who had surrounded a monk, and who seemed to be convulsed with laughter at what he was saying.

THE SACRED IMAGE

The two came to a halt, attracted by the unusual sight.

"Husband, dear," the woman said, "let us stop and hear what the holy man is saying. He seems to be a jolly friar and I wouldn't mind closing the day with a good laugh."

"Nor should I, in faith," the man replied. "The day's work is ended, so why deny ourselves a little fun, particularly as it costs nothing."

They elbowed their way into the crowd and when they were near enough to the speaker to distinguish his features they were utterly amazed. He was certainly no jester, as they had thought him. He stood there talking with the most solemn countenance. This fact, however, seemed only to add to the amusement of his hearers.

"How can this be!" the old woman

exclaimed. "That monk looks most devout, yet why do all these people laugh at him?"

"You mustn't marvel at our laughter," said a man in the throng who overheard her remark. "This monk comes from Lucca, in Italy, and is begging donations for a sacred image which, it appears, is to be found in a church of that city. He asserts that the image has the power to increase a hundredfold all offerings made to it. Can you imagine anything more absurd!"

"I'm only an ignorant farmer, maybe that's why I don't understand how he can find this so very absurd," the old man whispered to his wife.

They kept crowding nearer and nearer that they might hear with their own ears the monk declare that anyone who would make an offering, big or little, to the sacred image of the Crucified One which had been preserved in the Lucca Cathedral, would be repaid a hundred-fold.

The monk gave his assurance in a most convincing manner, but the populace seemed to regard it as a joke. For every word that he uttered the laughter grew louder and the jests more familiar.

"I can't understand these city folk," said the simple old peasant woman. "Don't they consider this a great offer? I only wish I had something to give to that Sacred Image!"

"You are quite right," the man agreed. "Look at the monk! He is an honest and trustworthy man who knows what he's talking about. Were I one of these rich townspeople I

shouldn't hesitate to give him my entire fortune, to get it back a hundredfold!"

"Dearly beloved husband!" cried the woman, "make your words good! We're not so very poor ourselves. Have we not our truck-garden, our hut, and our old donkey? True, they wouldn't bring any great sum if sold; but just consider that all at once it would become a hundred times greater! Then we should never lack for bread to the end of our days."

"You take the words out of my mouth!" exclaimed the husband. "All our lives long we have toiled and striven without being the richer for it. The time is nearing when we can no longer work and we must not miss this chance of providing for a comfortable old age."

With that their minds were made up. The following day they went over to a neighbor, a sensible and well-to-do farmer, to see if he would not purchase their hut, their garden and their old donkey.

The rich farmer had long wished to become owner of the little plot of land, which adjoined his own property, and was therefore pleased with the offer; but, as behooves a good neighbor, before the purchase was effected he naturally wanted to know what the old couple expected to live by after disposing of their property. And on learning how they intended to invest their money, he said:

"It is a fact that I have long wanted your garden, to lay out a road across the land, but I can't take upon myself the responsibility of granting your wish when I see that you mean to use the purchase money in such a foolish way.

We have been neighbors now for upward of thirty years and I don't want to become a party to your undoing."

Whereupon the old couple explained that the monk had said the sacred image had the power to repay them a hundredfold.

"Why not as well a thousandfold?" laughed the neighbor. "Such things are said by all monks from force of habit without expecting to be taken seriously."

The rich farmer put up every objection that an honest man should in a case of this kind. Only after the old couple had threatened to offer their property to another neighbor did he yield. He purchased everything for the sum of thirty florins, which he counted out of a leather pouch.

"Here is your money," he said.

"Only don't cast the blame on me when it's all gone and there is no other course open to you but to beg!"

"Good neighbor, when you see us again we shall have a hundred times as many florins as we possess to-day," declared the old woman. "So why should we trouble you or anyone else by begging?"

"Well, you two are certainly so crazy it's not worth while to talk sense to you!" laughed the farmer. "And now tell me what you mean to do first?"

"What we mean to do!" repeated the poor old peasant. "Why, neighbor, what else should we do but go to Lucca with our offering, and lay it before the Sacred Image?"

"I verily believe that monk was a sorcerer who turned your heads!" said the rich farmer, highly indignant. "How can you imagine that the statue of a saint is able to pay you to the penny? Moreover, why should you more than anyone else be assisted in such a marvelous way? I have a daughter who has been ill now for more than a year. If you but knew how much I have sacrificed for her sake, both to Saint Rosalie of Palermo and to other saints! But think you that I have been helped? No! Let me tell you that not a blessed saint has so much as moved a finger for her. She will soon be leaving me. That means the end of all happiness for me in this life."

When the rich man had said this, he waved a good-bye to his old neighbors and went hastily into his house; for he was ready to burst out crying.

The two old peasants stood there a moment and gazed after him.

"It is indeed true that no one is spared sorrow," remarked the old woman, drying her eyes. "Dear husband, for pity's sake keep in mind that we must implore the Sacred Image to enlighten our good neighbor as to why his prayers are not answered. He is a kind-hearted man who surely deserves to keep his beloved child."

Then the old couple went back home to bid an affectionate farewell to their faithful donkey. That done, there was nothing further to keep them in the home district. So they set out immediately on their journey to Lucca. Not wishing in any way to reduce their florins they determined to go all the way on foot, and in order to procure food for their needs, and night harbor, they had to resort to begging.

The journey proved by no means an

easy one, still they made their way without much let or hindrance till they came to Messina, from which point they had to be ferried across the strait that divides Sicily from the mainland. On reaching the harbor they found a little boat intended for travelers who journey on foot and carry but little luggage. They expected to board the boat without further ado, but were turned back by the boatman, a wretched galley slave who was chained to the craft with strong iron shackles.

"No, no, my fellow Christians!" the man protested, "neither of you can come aboard till you have paid a halfflorin for the passage."

He had stretched himself out on the rower's bench, as best he could, and shot the pious wanderers a forbidding glance. For they had come down to the ferry in the worst midday heat, when all activities were suspended and the boatman was allowed a couple of hours' rest.

"My good man, I see that you take us for beggars who would use your services without paying for them," said the old peasant; "but such is not the case. On the contrary, we are on our way to Italy to invest our money and when we return we'll be rich enough to pay you ten florins if you so wish. Only help us across free of charge this time and you'll never regret it!"

The galley slave raised his head a little, leered at them through half-closed eyes, then settled back again.

"Well, you look as if you must have a deal of money to invest!" he scoffed.

"As true as I live I have in my pouch no less than thirty florins," assured the old man, "but I don't want to touch these because they are meant for somebody who pays back a hundredfold all one gives to him. You understand, of course, that I don't care to dip into this sum but would rather pay you on our return."

This time the boatman raised his head with a little more interest.

"Who is it that pays back a hundredfold?" he asked.

"Who else could it be but the Sacred Image at Lucca!" the poor man exclaimed.

Whereupon the galley slave burst forth, with a laugh of derision:

"Let me tell you that I'm under orders to demand a half-florin from each person I ferry across the Strait. However, during my rest-hour I have the right to carry you across free of charge. Oh, don't thank me for this! since it would be a far greater charity on my part not to take you further. But as I have no desire to be charitable you shall get over into Italy. Once you are there, you will probably find your way to Lucca, where you shall see how you have been taken in."

Then he motioned to them to step aboard. Throughout the entire passage he said not a word, but when they put in at Reggio he took up anew his ironical tone:

"Since you are so confident that this image will help you, I want to say that no one can have sent up more prayers than I who sit here chained to the oars! I should also have received help since I'm not here for any crime committed by me, but in consequence of an unjust sentence. The mighty powers of Heav-

en should know of a remedy for such wrongs; but I can't see that any of them has taken the trouble to do aught for me!"

When the two old peasants had left the boat and were walking along the strand the old woman remarked that all the world was richer in sorrow and misfortune than she had ever thought possible.

"Yes, it is certainly filled with the despairing," agreed the husband. "Dear wife, we mustn't forget to ask the Mighty Image why this man receives no answer to his prayers and why he cannot be freed from his misery."

Thereupon they continued their journey, which consumed not only weeks but months. Finally, one evening, they came to a city they were told was Lucca.

"Husband, dear," said the old wo-

man as they passed through the city gate, "I'm very glad we have at last reached Lucca. If you feel as I do, let us go at once to the Cathedral, for I can neither eat nor rest until I have seen the Sacred Image."

"I'm of your mind," said the man.
"But if we expect to present our offering to the Image to-day, we must make haste; Vespers will soon be over and the church gates closed."

Although the old couple were tired after an all-day tramp they stepped along faster and faster and when they were within sight of the Cathedral they started to run. But nevertheless they were too late. The sacristan stood on the church steps thrusting the heavy bunch of church-keys under his belt when they came up.

"Ah, Signor Sacristan! Signor Sac-

ristan!" the old woman began, for she was the first to arrive. "Won't you take pity on us and let us into the church—only for a few seconds? You don't know how long we have tramped! We have come all the way from Palermo with an offering for the Sacred Image in there and—"

"Signor Sacristan!" cried the old man, interrupting his wife, "we are no beggars! You see here a pouch containing thirty florins, which we intend to give to your wonder-working Image, knowing that it will come back to us a hundredfold."

In their eagerness they had seized hold of the sacristan's robe, to detain him. But this eagerness on their part almost made the church custodian think them a pair of lunatics.

"What's the matter with you?" he

shouted. "The church is closed for today. There will be no Mass here before morning."

"Dear friend," said the woman, "we don't want to hear a Mass! We have churches and priests a-plenty in Sicily, so we certainly didn't have to come all this long way because of that. We are here for the sole purpose of giving thirty florins to your Sacred Image, for we know that He pays back a hundredfold all offerings made to Him."

The poor woman spoke now with more assurance than ever, since she was in a place where she felt certain of being understood. But the sacristan was as much astonished at her assertions as all the others had been.

"Good Signor Sacristan, you, surely, must know the real facts! It was a monk from this city that told us all

about the Sacred Image down at Palermo."

"My good people, I assure you that I know nothing about it," said the sacristan, "and, moreover, I don't comprehend a word of what you are saying. You had best relate fully everything in connection with this matter. You appear to be sensible folk, but you talk like lunatics."

As they told him their story, the church custodian thought:

"If these people have been so foolhardy as to tramp from Palermo to Lucca in order to give their money to the Sacred Image, it will be futile to deny them entrance to the church. At all events, they are not likely to go from here with anything short of my opening the door for them."

He took the keys from his belt to

unlock the door, meanwhile making a final attempt to undeceive them.

"Well, my friends," he said as he turned the heavy bolts, "it is actually true that in this church there is an old image of Our Saviour; but it is in a very dilapidated condition. It hangs unnoticed on a pillar and none who worship in this church say prayers to it. I pledge you my word that in the five and twenty years I have been sacristan at the Cathedral it has performed no miracle."

'The two old peasants were exceedingly astonished at these statements.

"Oh, my friends!" the sacristan went on, "if this image had the power you ascribe to it, it should at least do something for this rosebush by the wall! Once it decked the entire wall with the most beautiful roses, but for the past two years it has ceased to blossom. I water and tend it as well as I can so that it looks quite fresh and green. I can't understand why I shouldn't see it once more in all its floral glory!"

He sighed heavily and looked so troubled that the poor old pilgrims finally assured him that as soon as they stood before the Sacred Image they would ask why the rosebush no longer put forth any buds. But apparently he attached no importance to their promises.

"Now, hurry along!" he said, throwing open the church doors, "and I will remain just outside and wait for you. You'll have no difficulty finding the image, for it hangs on the pillar nearest the lighted lamp."

The old couple were certainly astonished at his story, but their faith was in nowise dimmed. They had hardly noticed that the door was open, when they rushed into the church.

But once inside, they paused; for in this ancient house of God, with its few and narrow windows, reigned absolute darkness. Far back flickered a tiny red flame; but how to find their way to it without stumbling against pillars and tombs they did not know.

The old woman took a step forward. She came near falling down a stairway, but checked herself, utterly terrified.

"Dear husband, this is certainly illluck! To know that the Sacred Image is but a step or two from here, yet not to be able to reach it!"

"Keep quiet a moment, till our eyes become accustomed to the darkness in here," whispered the man. For he was too deeply awed by the sanctity of the place to utter a loud word. All at once it seemed to them that the little red flame which burned at the farther end of the church had been cut in two. Half of it began to shoot hither and thither and, wherever it moved, candles were lighted upon altars and candelabra, so that the darkness was quickly dispelled.

"O husband, dear! you see there are lights back there. Now it won't be hard to find the Sacred Image."

"Dear wife, the sacristan was more kindly disposed than he made it appear. He must have entered by way of the sacristy to light some candles, that we might find our way around. Only I can't understand why he should go to all this trouble for us. Two or three candles would have been quite enough; but you see that not only the main altar is lighted up but the chapels, too, and all the hanging lamps."

That was true. The whole church was ablaze with light. The poor peasants were at that moment so absorbed by their thoughts of the wonder-working statue that they no longer marveled at the numberless lighted candles, or at how they had become lighted.

"It must be that this is some special Saint's Fête," said the woman. "Anyhow I'm glad the candles are lit. I always feel doubly solemn when I see many burning candles in a church. Do you know what? I wish I might hear the organ!"

This was no sooner spoken than a succession of faint, soft strains were heard from the organ loft.

"No, but listen!" exclaimed the old man. "To-night you get everything you wish for. And what beautiful playing in this church! Such glorious music I have not heard even at the Cathedral in Palermo."

"It is so sweet that one could well believe an angel was playing!" said the old woman. "But anything less than that I had not expected, either, in this church. Now I only wish it were also filled with incense, for the clouds of sweet incense always make me feel that I am in a holy place."

She had barely uttered this wish, when the old man said in tones of surprise:

"Did you ever sense such a delightful fragrance? This is the most delicate, the faintest and the sweetest incense I have ever smelled."

They saw no person swing a censer any more than they had seen an organist in the organ loft; nor did they try to reason out how all this had come to pass. They lived only in thoughts of the Sacred Image. Now they began to move, that they might soon come to it. They walked very slowly up the center aisle, for to them it would have seemed most unfitting to exhibit any haste.

When they were about in the middle of the church, they stopped. Some one was coming toward them. It was a tall, beautiful woman in an azure robe and crimson mantle. She wore on her head a little crown of pearls and precious stones, and around her neck and arms were costly jewels.

She greeted the old peasants with the friendliest of smiles—as a hostess might have received honored and longed-for guests—and asked what they were seeking in the church at this late hour.

"Most honored Lady Queen!" said the old woman in joyful tones—for such a kind and beautiful face she had never before looked upon—"we have come hither, my husband and I, to make an offering to the Sacred Image which hangs on a pillar in this church."

Whereupon the old couple began, as usual, to relate their entire story, from the evening they had heard the monk preach in the street at Palermo to their meeting with the sacristan on the church step.

The Stranger regarded them all the while with the same kindliness; but it seemed to them that her countenance had taken on a sad expression during their recital.

"Alas!" she said when she had heard all, "it is not for me to determine if your hopes are to be realized. But I fear the worst. There is nothing so rarely to be met with as the faith that God is able to grant the wishes of men. Suffering sometimes comes as a punishment for wrongdoing. As an example, only look at the sacristan," she continued. "He complains because a rosebush which is very precious to him no longer puts forth any buds; but he does not consider that this is meant as a reminder to him. Lo, these many years he has allowed the sacred images of the saints, which you see all around us, to go to rack and ruin for lack of care. He never gives them a thought, yet he finds it hard that God does not bring to pass the thing he has set his heart upon, which would be a very simple matter, for the sacristan need only know that he must sprinkle the rosebush with water from another and a purer spring to make it bloom again. But first the man must understand that he who expects God to adorn the rosebush for him should not neglect to have all the images left in his charge stand forth in their full glory and ornamentation."

"We might have known there was some such cause for it!" sighed the old couple. "Truly we have sinned more than he, yet we have come hither with full faith in the promise given to us."

The beautiful lady elevated her eyebrows a little, then went on speaking in the same sweet tone:

"A firm faith is a good thing, but it is not enough to make your prayers reach God. You might perhaps wish for something that would be hurtful to you. You have but just told me about a poor galley slave who rows a boat between Messina and Reggio. Only a few years ago he was a rich merchant, and, moreover, a good man who wronged no

one. But he was such a slave to high living and bodily pleasures that he would have brought upon himself terrible sicknesses and would probably have been dead long ago if God had not sent misfortune to him. It so happens that a thief had stolen a crown of precious stones from the head of an image of the Virgin at this Cathedral. To avert suspicion from himself the thief removed one of the precious stones and slipped it into the pocket of the rich merchant. This stone was found on him; he was charged with the theft of the Madonna's crown, and, despite all his protestations of innocence, was doomed to be chained to the oars and to row travelers across the Strait for the rest of his days. Nothing would be easier than to help him, for the real thief hid the crown in a corner of the belfry and left it there.

The instant this is found the merchant's innocence will be established and he will be freed. But how can God sanction this until the man has had a change of heart? Were he to be helped before that happens he would at once plunge into his old manner of living and go to certain destruction."

"Dear, gracious Lady, we are glad to know that this is the *real* cause of the man's suffering under an unjust sentence. We have thought that perhaps it was thus. As for ourselves, we don't know whether that which we desire would be helpful or harmful to us; we have only that promise to hold to."

The lovely apparition raised her eyes, as if impatient at their persistency, then continued in a voice that became gentler the longer she spoke:

"A firm faith is a good thing, but it

is not certain that for this alone God will answer your prayers. It may be that He would first teach you to be content with the good already bestowed upon you.

"In this connection I am thinking of your good neighbor, the rich farmer. Besides the beautiful daughter who is ailing there is still another, but she is plain and slightly deformed; therefore he has always been unkind to her. Yet she is intelligent, industrious and good-hearted, and very helpful to him. Her sufferings have so moved God that He has sent sickness upon her sister, and, although it could be very easily removed, for it is only due to a poisoned comb which a spiteful Arab woman sold to her, still she must perhaps die from it if her father cannot by some other means be taught to love both children equally. The sick girl need only stop combing her hair with the dangerous comb to regain her health; but this will not come to pass until the father learns to value the treasure which God has given him in his homely daughter."

"Verily, the more I hear you speak, most gracious Lady, the more I am assured of God's wisdom and justice!" said the old woman. "Certainly we two old people have often neglected to thank Him for His many blessings, but all the same we trust in the promise made to us."

At these words the most radiant smile illumined the features of the noble lady, and, motioning to the old peasants to follow her, she said:

"I have cautioned you, my friends, but I perceive that you cannot be shaken in your purpose. But consider once more the difficulties of getting an answer to prayer, before you part with your florins."

Without waiting for a reply she conducted them to a certain pillar and pointed upward. On this pillar, near the ceiling, there hung a large cross of age-darkened wood upon which was fastened an image of the Christ so unlike all other presentations of the Crucified One they had ever seen that they turned to their guide to learn if they had gone aright.

"This image is very old," she explained, "and poorly preserved; but, in truth it is a presentation of my Son, the Crucified Saviour."

The old couple were now so intently regarding the sacred image that for the moment they did not grasp the full im-

port of her words. This came to them later.

"Husband, dear!" whispered the old woman, "the saint up there almost frightens me with his thick eyebrows and sunken eyes. It distresses me to see him pictured without a beard. I don't recognize him!"

They pondered also that the image was clothed in a tunic of black velvet, belted at the waist, and was shod in wooden sandals. Moreover, it was covered with dust and must have hung there for ages without receiving either inspection or care.

"You appear to be greatly troubled," said their guide. "You had expected that the Master whose help you seek should present a wholly different appearance."

"Dear, gracious Lady Queen!" the

old man protested, "we think nothing of the kind. We are glad we did not immediately recognize Him. We know it was thus when He wandered here on earth: He was lowly in His outward man and people did not at once understand that He was the Son of God."

The Strange Lady's face fairly glowed.
"Then present to Him your offering,"
she said.

Without another word, the two old people fell upon their knees and bowed their heads to the stone floor:

"O Christ, Son of God! accept our offering and hear our prayer. Here are the thirty florins we got for our garden, our hut, and our old donkey. We have brought them here all the way from Sicily, knowing that you pay back a hundredfold. Let not our faith be put to shame, but grant us sufficient for our needs, that we may enjoy a serene old age."

While they were praying the old man

detached the pouch from his belt and pushed it toward the pillar which supported the cross.

They repeated the same prayer without raising their heads. Suddenly they heard a slight noise above them. They glanced up; the wooden image had loosed a hand and a foot from the nails that pierced them. The old woman gripped hard her husband's hand, but neither of them spoke. Their hearts throbbed with blissful expectation; they were surer now than ever that their prayers would be answered.

With a quick movement the image of Christ released the wooden sandal from its foot and let it drop toward the devotees, then relapsed into its usual attitude, looking down upon them from the cross with the same stern and sorrowful mien as before.

It was all the work of a second, and

the old couple would not have believed their eyes but for the sandal that lay on the floor in plain sight. It was only an ordinary sandal, with wooden sole and leather thongs. It bore no precious stone or other ornamentation, and was altogether valueless.

Apparently the noble Lady, who still lingered near, thought the two old peasants were disappointed.

"Alas!" she said, pityingly, "this sandal may seem a poor reward for your great sacrifice, but it is not yet too late to change your minds. You may let it lie where it is and take back your florins—"

The two old peasants glanced up at her, almost rebukingly.

"Dear, noble Lady, what do you mean!" they exclaimed. "The Sacred Image has certainly granted us all that

He could in His poverty. He has performed a miracle to give us this sandal. That, surely, is worth a thousand times more than our paltry florins!"

At these words the Lady's countenance became radiant with the tenderest of smiles.

"You are *true* servants of my Son," she said, "and your faith in Him shall not be betrayed. The innocent wishes of the faithful God will always grant."

The Stately Lady now became enveloped in light so clear and dazzling that the old couple had to close their eyes; and when they opened them again the church was in darkness, the candles were extinguished, the organ music was hushed, and the beautiful Lady had vanished.

But there was scarcely time to marvel at the change, for they were not left alone the space of a second. The church doors were suddenly thrown open and the sacristan came rushing in.

"Saintly travelers!" he cried. "What a miracle! I witnessed it. I was sitting on the step waiting for you; but when you lingered on and on, I got up and peeped through the key-hole. Then I saw you move forward in streams of celestial light and I saw the Holy Mother of God step down from the altar and walk with you. And then I saw the Crucified One bend over you to present to you His sandal. Ah, but you must come with me at once to the Bishop!"

He took them along to the Bishop, who sat in the Chapter-house surrounded by his priests. He narrated; the two old peasants narrated, so that finally the Reverend Fathers realized

that a great miracle had been performed.

For the first, the Bishop summoned his treasurer.

"My friend," he said, "I would purchase the sandal which these good people in so marvelous a manner have received from the Sacred Image for the sum of three thousand florins, if they will sell it to me. I do not wish to have it borne away from Lucca."

When the money had been counted out and placed in the old man's hand, the Bishop said to the pilgrims:

"Before you leave Lucca I invite you to be present with us at the removal of the Sacred Image to its proper place, above the main altar. But thereupon you must hasten back by the way you came and relate all that you have experienced to each and every one who will listen. I rejoice that through you

the galley slave will be loosed from his bonds and your good neighbor's daughter will be cured of her sickness, just as I am certain that the sacristan will not fail to let the church rosebush come to bloom."

He paused a moment, then raising his hands over the two old peasants he said:

"It is you who are wise; we are the fools! Who among us does not know that God is all powerful? And yet not one of us dares rely wholly on His support. Thank God for the gift of Faith! It is the greatest of all His blessings."





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